Party Discipline in the Canadian Parliament and Provincial Legislatures

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June, 1991

Introduction

There has been a great deal said in the media recently about the increasing cynicism of the Canadian electorate. Many people feel that they are too far removed from the political process and that their elected legislators do not take into account the wishes of the public when they form policy and pass laws. A major concern voiced is that, once elected, politicians no longer represent their constituents but rather the party itself. They cannot deviate from party decisions in support of their constituents or even their own better judgment. The present form of government is perceived by some as a kind of "legalized dictatorship" whereby the Cabinet "is able to impose its will on [the] legislature as long as it has a majority of seats" (Jhappan, 1).

Perhaps in part because of the apparent cynicism of Canadians, some academics and political parties have proposed rather dramatic reforms to the legislative process. They suggest the loosening of party discipline, more free votes in the House and direct involvement of the electorate in creating policy and laws. Direct involvement could be orchestrated through referenda, through some kind of guarantee that a citizen's petition will be read and debated in the Legislature, or simply by having their opinions heard by government committees such as the Spicer Commission or the Alberta Hearings on Constitutional Reform. Other proposals include representation by ordinary citizens through the adoption of a constituent assembly.

It is my intent to examine the nature of party discipline, its history in Canadian politics and the ways in which our legislative

process would be altered if such a reform were introduced in the Legislature.

The Rise of Party Discipline in Canadian Politics

Party discipline can be defined as "a mechanism political parties use to keep their members functioning as a cohesive group rather than as a collection of disparate individuals" (Flavelle and Kaye, 6). Flavelle and Kaye suggest that the most obvious form of party discipline is demonstrated in the tendency of political parties to vote the same way in the Canadian Parliament or in provincial legislatures.

The tendency to vote as a party has not always been a prominent feature of the Canadian political system. It has its roots in the notion of responsible government, which holds that a government may remain in office only as long as it maintains the support of the legislature, and that it must resign if it loses a major vote in the House. Flavelle and Kaye maintain that until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, most elected members in the House of Commons were elected as independents, or "loose fish," a term coined by Sir John A. Macdonald (6). These members seemed more concerned with their own political advancement than with the success of a particular political party and had no need to support a party by voting in accordance with it in the House.

The development of party discipline on the Canadian scene may be linked to the expansion of the electorate and changes in Canadian electoral practices:

> Until 1878, the open ballot meant that voters had to publicly declare their support of a candidate; elections were non-simultaneous and the government could schedule difficult constituency elections to take place after those in "safe" constituencies, so as to make use of bandwagon effects, and the government could gerrymander constituency boundaries to minimize opposition voting strength. Changes in these electoral practices encouraged the development of a disciplined party system. In order to fulfil election promises to newly enfranchised groups, parties needed individuals who would act in concert with their party colleagues.
>
> (Flavelle and Kaye, 6)

Although party discipline has not always been a feature of the Canadian political system, through custom and convention, it has certainly become enshrined in our present one. It seems, however, Canadians are ready for a change to this system. The question is, are our politicians ready for such a change?

The Nature of Party Discipline

Most Albertans are familiar with the well-publicized case of Tom Sindlinger, an MLA from 1979-82 who was expelled from the Alberta Progressive Conservative caucus for not "towing the party line." It would seem that his expulsion from the caucus for having and voicing his own opinions was harsh judgment to say the least. Lemco and Regenstreif claim that a dissident member may suffer many kinds of abuse for refusing his or her public support for the party:

> He may be ostracized by his party associates. He may forfeit opportunity for future promotion to cabinet. He may find that what little ability he has to perform favours and services for constituents is impeded. Finally, he may find that the party will refuse him funds, organization and the party label should he offer himself for re-election (32).

David Kilgour, who abandoned party lines by voting against the GST, and John Kirsner push these claims even further, suggesting that "the whips of government parties have for decades used the possibility of an early election to push their members into voting the party line" (36).

These arguments suggest that party discipline is forced upon members by the party leader and cabinet, even against the wishes of individual members. However, other research indicates that discipline is not really imposed, but that members willingly accept the norm of party discipline, because they have been socialized to understand that it is an acceptable way for the system to operate and for political parties and governments to succeed. Survey research conducted among Members of Parliament led Allan Kornberg to conclude that most legislators "were motivated by a desire to see the party achieve its goals and to maintain its viability" (134), while only some members (23%) suggested that they expected that they "would be rewarded for acting cohesively, or, alternately, punished for not behaving in this way" (133).

It was seen to be advantageous to lend support to a party, because the party and its members mutually strengthen each other. Generally, a politician chooses a certain party because it represents a philosophy which is acceptable to him or her, and that member has a sincere desire to perpetuate the party in order to see certain policies implemented. The party cannot enforce any policy at all if it does not have enough seats to form government. On the other hand, a politician running as an independent has little hope

of winning a seat due to the overwhelming visibility and strength of political parties in the Canadian system. The member needs the backing of a party organization to win her or his seat, just as a party may need to take that seat to win a majority in the general election.

Darryl Grant Balasko surveyed Manitoba MLAs and made similar conclusions to those of Kornberg. He suggests that members are socialized to understand that they are expected to act in a responsible and cohesive manner within their respective parties and that they follow the discipline norm because they choose to, not because it is forced upon them by their caucus (29). Nevertheless, a certain level of pressure is necessary to ensure that members do vote according to party lines, but if this pressure or "normativeness" is found to be too extreme, "members will complain that the discipline is too stringent" and "group morale and cohesion are likely to suffer" (Kornberg, 130). Kornberg notes, however, that most of the MPs he surveyed did not believe the level of normativeness within caucus was maximal.

Members of government are perhaps willing to accept party discipline because their actions could have a direct and detrimental effect on the status of the government they represent. Though legally entitled to vote any way they choose, members of the governing party are not likely to take actions which might result in the direct overthrow of the existing government (McDonough, 3). Survey research done in British Columbia and Ontario indicates that cabinet ministers generally "feel more constrained by caucus

decisions than government backbenchers," while opposition members feel freer "to reject caucus decisions than government backbenchers" (Fletcher and Goddard, 663). A simple explanation for this finding may be that opposition members have less at stake; although they may wish to appear unified and cohesive in the public eye, they are certainly not at risk of losing any claim to government.

Party Discipline and the Government Backbencher

Much has been made of the apparently insignificant role of the government backbencher who is practically invisible in the political world but is nevertheless required to appear in the House to vote alongside his or her caucus. Philip Day suggests that "apart from cabinet ministers Donald Mazankowski, Joe Clark, and Harvie Andre it is difficult to see what precise purpose many of the other Alberta MPs serve." He calls them "stalwart party loyalists" who are rewarded for their behaviour by sitting for "days or weeks without uttering a sound during sittings" (11).

While government backbenchers are not prominent in question period or formulating important legislation, this does not necessarily mean that they have not played a role in formulating government policy. According to Peter McCormack of the University of Lethbridge, the weekly caucus meetings and the committee system installed under the Lougheed government provided a very open forum for discussion and the airing of many divergent views (8). Although McCormack recognizes that this model may be more

reflective of the Lougheed style than a general Alberta model, he points out that the backbencher is not necessarily without a voice, but rather that important debate takes place behind the closed doors of the caucus room where differences are ironed out and a consensus is reached. It is here that private members have input into the formation of policy and legislation (McDonough, 7). Unfortunately, this forum does not allow constituents to see how their MLAs approached certain issues and if they sincerely attempted to represent their constituents' concerns.

While it has been suggested that caucus members are never allowed to deviate from the party line, Kornberg's research shows that members themselves are easily able to identify situations in which it is acceptable for a member to take a different position publicly:

> A Canadian MP can act independently of his party if, 1) he informs his colleagues beforehand that he intends to withhold his support (2) his relations with his constituents will be jeopardized by a party vote, and (3) his conscience will not permit him to support the party on a particular issue (136).

McCormack applies this type of argument to the Sindlinger case in Alberta and argues that "Sindlinger's 'crime' was that his opposition came 'out of the blue' rather than being voiced in caucus and giving his colleagues notice that he intended to speak out, either in public or in the House" (10). Apparently, Sindlinger violated the only real condition placed on a member's right to speak out against members of his own caucus and was therefore obliged to suffer being expelled from it.

This argument is supported by Martin Westmacott, who suggests

that, although the party whip is seen to exert a great deal of influence over the voting trends of members, a whip cannot really threaten to impose penalties or sanctions on members who refuse to vote the party line. Instead, the whip "must employ his considerable powers of persuasion to contain intra-party dissent and to encourage party cohesion" (16). This suggests the party expects dialogue on certain issues between a dissenting member and the whip or the rest of the caucus, not that the member will speak out suddenly without consulting the caucus beforehand. Members may be persuaded to accept the party position voluntarily, but are rarely forced into accepting the position against their will.

Suggested Reforms Regarding Party Discipline

When people argue in favour of the relaxation of party discipline, they usually mean two things. First, there would be more free votes in the House, so that members would not be compelled to vote along party lines but could use their vote to represent either the wishes of their constituents or, in some cases, their own moral judgment. Second, there would have to be a clearer understanding of what constitutes a major vote and on which occasions the government would have to recognize defeat as the loss of the confidence of the assembly. The British parliament, for example, has been moving toward a less rigid definition of confidence, and although the government suffered 65 defeats between 1972 and 1979, only three were followed by votes of confidence, and only once did the prime minister request dissolution (Flavelle and

Kaye, 6). Moderate proposals for change would limit votes of confidence to a government's defeat on its budget or on matters which are crucial to its legislative program. We would likely continue to see bloc voting on these issues, but others could be considered free votes, since the government would not understand itself to have lost the confidence of the majority in the House if they were defeated on other motions or pieces of legislation. Other features of a reformed parliamentary system may include the reduction of the powers of the Prime Minister or Premier by setting fixed terms of office instead of allowing the incumbent to set the date, and direct election of the Premier or Prime Minister by the people.

Several arguments may be made in favour of the relaxation of party discipline. It would mean that members would be free to vote according to the wishes of their constituents if the party position placed them in direct conflict with their constituents (Flavelle and Kaye, 8). There seems to be wide public support for members to begin listening to their electors, as evidenced by the recent attempt of some constituents to sue Willie Littlechild, an Alberta MP, for voting against their wishes by supporting the GST. A Gallup poll conducted as early as 1983 revealed that only 7.9% of respondents believed that a member should support the party in voting, while 49.5% believed members should vote according to the wishes of constituents, and 38.3% suggested that the member should vote according to his or her own conscience (Flavelle and Kaye, 8). Allowing members to represent constituents directly would likely

reduce the current level of cynicism of the Canadian electorate.

Relaxing party discipline could also increase the profile of government backbenchers. As early as 1980, Robert Stanfield suggested that there be more free votes in the Commons in order to "increase the dignity of the backbenchers." Free votes would probably have a positive effect on public perception of both government and opposition members, making them appear stronger and more independent than they do at present. The cynical public might be better able to put their trust in a representative who appears to speak out according to their wishes. In addition, the relaxation of discipline would enable opposition members to play a more direct role in the business of governing, since relaxed discipline would encourage all members, either government or opposition, to support bills and amendments which they believe would be good for the country or the province. Opposition members and their constituents would be encouraged to see more of their own legislation passed and recognized by the public as their own work. Dr. Jhappan suggests that the authority of committees should be increased in the House by making them all-party committees who would become another source of actual legislation. Both cabinet and committees would have the power to veto each other, again creating further similarities to the U.S. with its system of checks and balances (Jhappan, 4). Such committees would provide opposition members and backbenchers with a greatly increased role in the actual governing and legislating process of the Assembly.

Flavelle and Kaye argue that we may have better representation

of regions if party discipline is relaxed (9). A less disciplined and rigid exchange inside and outside the House would enable members to negotiate among themselves for support on votes (similar to the U.S. congressional system) and may allow them to speak for a given region, even though the region is represented by members of both government and opposition parties (7). This argument is also supported by Kilgour and Kirsner who insist that "coalitions composed of members from all parties could exist for the purposes of working together on matters of common regional or other concern" (36). It is perhaps ironic that, while Canadian scholars are encouraging the adoption of some aspects of the less disciplined American system, Allan Kornberg, in 1967, suggested that "from Woodrow Wilson to E.E. Schattschneider, the discipline and cohesion exhibited by British parties have served as a model toward which the American parties have sought to aspire" (129). It seems that both the American and British or Canadian systems may indeed have their limits.

There is also the possibility that less rigid discipline could actually improve public policy (Flavelle and Kaye, 9). This would be due to the increasing credibility of the input of opposition and backbench members and the acceptance of amendments and bills introduced by these members. Their legislation and initiatives would no longer be impeded simply because they are not members of cabinet, and this collaboration of ideas may result in a more cooperative spirit in the House and ultimately better legislation. It may also lead governments to reveal more willingly the

information and studies upon which policy decisions are based. This would certainly provide opposition and backbench members with more information than they receive from government at present, and the reduced level of secrecy regarding government decisions may make other members more willing to support a piece of legislation introduced by the government.

Naturally, arguments in favour of maintaining party discipline may also be made. Party discipline, though criticized for making members of a given party appear identical, has the advantage of providing voters with clear alternatives delineated by party platform (Flavelle and Kaye, 7). At present, governing parties are expected to formulate policy and opposition members are expected to criticize it and provide an alternative. If the lines of party discipline were relaxed significantly, parties would need to gather the support of individual members and would therefore be taxed to find out what position individual members from all parties take on certain issues. The process could indeed become complex. This type of individual negotiation, a feature of the American congressional system which many are presently advocating, has the additional drawback of making members more vulnerable to the concentrated efforts of lobbyists and special interest groups than our political parties are at present.

A system without party discipline could also be a very unpredictable one. Under the present system, cabinet ministers and private members alike know the fate of their bills before they are ever introduced in the House. Party cohesion ensures that a

government will most certainly have no difficulty passing its budget or its legislative program and ensures that in a time of crisis, a quick decision could be made by the government. Substantial changes to the present system would not be without unexpected problems, and the lack of predictability in the House may have a greater effect than scholars recognize. As Lemco and Regenstreif point out, the timing of the relaxation of party discipline would also be imperative; all parties in the House would have to relax their reins at the same time or the change could be particularly chaotic (33).

Will Party Discipline Be Abandoned?

Although perhaps a novel popular issue, the notion of relaxing party discipline is not wholly new. However, the popular demand for a more accountable government -- one that listens to the people and not the party line -- has made many politicians and academics alike stop to think about the consequences of continuing on with the present system. The cynicism of the Canadian electorate has made politicians aware that changes have to be made, and that Canadians demand fair representation by their elected members.

It may be argued that a significant factor contributing to the increasing popularity of the Reform Party is their policy platform regarding representation. The party holds that "representative government in Canada requires...Members of Parliament who have at least some independence from party discipline" (Reform Party, 9). The party also takes a firm stance on the issue of confidence in

the House of Commons:

> Specifically, we maintain that the defeat of a government measure in the House of Commons should not automatically mean the defeat of the government. Defeat of the government motion should be followed by a formal motion of non-confidence, the passage of which would require either the resignation of the government or dissolution of the House for a general election (9).

The Reform Party has popularized the issue of accountability further by calling for members to vote according to the wishes of constituents, although they do allow for "occasions when the Reform Party...will have to bloc-vote in order to be an effective political party in the House of Commons" (10). They suggest the wide-spread use of referenda as a means of involving Canadian citizens directly in the decision-making process. These divergences from the practices of other Canadian political parties may account in part for the rising popularity of the Reform Party and for the apparent willingness of the Canadian electorate to trust this party and its leader more than the others. It should be noted that at the April, 1991 Reform Party convention, delegates voted to change the policy on constituent voting somewhat. Members will be limited to a free vote in caucus but will be required to vote with the party in the House of Commons. The party plans to make the caucus vote public and also indicates that a member may diverge from the party line if his or her constituents are strongly opposed to it.

It should be pointed out, however, that the Reform Party is by no means the first political party to advocate relaxed discipline. The Alberta Liberal Party has called for this change recently, and

as early as 1986 the Alberta New Democratic Party distributed election material which contained innovative ideas for change:

> We propose two broad reforms...1) the loosening of the currently rigid lines of party discipline within the legislature; and 2) the creation of a modified right of "initiative" by petition whereby Albertans could directly cause the government of the day to consider a specific proposal. (Alberta New Democratic Party, 4)

If other parties were proposing similar types of changes, why has popular support for those changes focused primarily on the Reform Party? The answer is likely that the Reform Party has not yet established a presence in either the Commons or any legislature, and they have had no opportunity to prove to Canadians that they will hold to their promises regarding parliamentary reform. The New Democrats and Liberals in Alberta, while claiming to desire change, continue to abide by the conventional rules of the system and vote according to the party line in the House.

The United Farmers' movement in Alberta in the early 1900's advocated just such a relaxation of party discipline and goals and "sought to use the fixed term as a device to eliminate the 'coercive' nature of party discipline" (Olling, 9). If elected, they promised to adopt a structure of "group government" whose philosophy it was "to reject the cabinet- and caucus-dominated structure of the old order and, instead to subject elected representatives to the 'democratic' control of the constituency organization." Under this system, "the individual representative would become a delegate...and critic of government at the same time unconcerned with party organization, re-election, or even maintaining a U.F.A. administration" (Olling, 10). As is to be

expected, the U.F.A. found group government much easier to talk about than to implement, and when the people of Alberta elected the U.F.A. in 1921, they were disillusioned to discover that this organization made little attempt to veer away from the accepted convention of party discipline.

The idea of relaxed party lines has arisen once again, yet this time the desire seems to spread nation-wide, rather than concentrating itself in a few provinces. While the idea is not new, it may be that the system and the people are ripe for change. This example from the past seems to indicate that relaxation is talked about only by opposition and is not implemented even if that same party forms government; however, the example occurred long ago and under different circumstances. It seems that parliamentary reform will indeed reach the House of Commons and perhaps some provincial legislatures; the question is when and how far this reform will extend.

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Appendix

Alberta Liberal Party Convention, Calgary, March 2nd, 1991
Panel on Government Accountability

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"Making Parliament Responsive: the Implications of Abandoning Party Discipline"

Intro:

In wake of Meech Lake failure, Canadians started to hear Political Science buzz-word, "executive federalism", and started to cotton on to the fact that it means a handful of Premiers and the P.M. hashing out deals on really important issues (like the Constitution) without so much as a by-your-leave from the lo-ing herds

Appears to be general belief that governments/ executives aren't held to account for actions, except once every four or five years via ballot-box, but once in office, legalized dictatorship whereby a Committee of 39 (fondly known as the Cabinet) is able to impose its will on legislature as long as it has a majority of seats.

View exacerbated by Mulroney regime's manifestly unpopular agenda which has assaulted Canadians' fondly-held illusion that we have had accountable governments up to now, it's just that Mulroney doesn't play according to the rules of the game.

Truth is, Mulroney hasn't done anything not allowed by the customs, rules, and conventions of our version of Parliamentary democracy, it's just that he has used the Parliamentary process and the unfortunate loopholes in the system to implement a number of particularly loathsome policies

* What is surprising is that it has taken the Canadian public so long to realize that the mythology of accountability between elections is just part of our collective delusions about Parliamentary democracy and representative government. Perhaps the Prime Minister has done us a favour by exposing the myth once and for all.

My purposes today:

1. to look at how Parliamentary conventions such as party discipline have turned MPs in both the governing party and the opposition parties into political eunuchs who cannot be held accountable to their constituents under the present system

2. to look at how party discipline has insulated the political executive, making it virtually unaccountable to the legislature

3. to look at implications of loosening or getting rid of party discipline altogether -- effects on four elements of Parliamentary process:
   (a) responsible government
   (b) Private Members' bills
   (c) Parliamentary committees
   (d) opposition parties and their role

1. Party Discipline - MPs' Accountability

Party discipline means voting according to the party line = essential to current form of parliamentary democracy, because means if governing party has majority of seats, can stay in office for full 5 years as it will never lose a major vote or a vote of no-confidence.

- means MPs don't and can't vote according to constituency preferences, and we must take a leap of faith when we vote for a candidate that the party's line on issues will match our own or at least be tolerable

- given that first-past-the post electoral system means that most MPs won seats without majority of votes cast, can't necessarily rely on my MP to represent my interests anyway, but this exacerbated by party discipline once MP in House

party discipline also means that regional or local or any other specific interests subordinated to need of incumbent government to stay in power

party discipline therefore means that MPs are representatives of their parties, not of the constituencies which elect them, and we cannot expect them to be anything more under the current system.

2. Party Discipline - Executive Autonomy

Since Cabinets depend for their survival on MPs always voting with the government, use a number of carrots and sticks to ensure compliance:

- carrots include promotion to Cabinet, Parliamentary Sects, junior ministers, heads of committees, etc.

- sticks include no carrots; threat of taking party name off ballot at elections, expulsion from caucus, (Pat Carney) and ultimately, calling an election. Given 30% turnover in average election, no-one wants to risk losing seat, or go to trouble or expense of fighting an election campaign

parties (Tories and Liberals) as currently organized have no formal mechanisms for deposing a sitting P.M. (unlike British parties), so backbenchers at his mercy for the duration

therefore, backbencher compliance assured, and in case of a majority government, virtually no chance of defeat in House, making idea of **responsible government** (i.e. the convention that if the government loses a vote on a major bill, like the Budget, or loses a vote of no-confidence, it must resign) pretty well moot. Therefore, executive insulated and unaccountable to House.

3. The Implications of Abandoning Party Discipline

(a) responsible government

If we get rid of party discipline, MPs can be more accountable to constituencies, because won't be constrained to vote for government line always (neither will opposition MPs be bound to vote with their parties). A free vote on every bill, which is a matter of public record (so voters can check up on how MPs vote), will mean MPs will *have to* be sensitive and accountable to constituencies.

sounds good, but what does it mean for Parliamentary process? Means abandoning myth of responsible government. If not, government would be regularly defeated, high turnover as Gov-Gen called upon opposition leader after opposition leader who claims to be able to maintain the confidence of the House, or election after election to select new government.

this ultimately means a separation of powers, much like American system, so government can lose votes without having to resign

also probably means fixed terms (no P.M. discretion to call elections), and will vastly increase likelihood that executive will have to bargain, negotiate and compromise with MPs – this is very good in terms of accountability

(b) Private Members Bills

Currently House spends 2-3% of time on P.M.B.s, very few successful. If we're going to get rid of party discipline and responsible government, we might as well give MPs more chances to introduce legislative ideas, and not just be rubber-stamps for government initiatives. But maybe best way to do this is by strengthening Parliamentary committees

(c) Parliamentary Committees

these should be all-party committees, with members chosen by lot (or each MP submits list of committee preferences, picked out of a hat). Key is that members are not chosen by P.M. or party whips.

Committees ideally would have power either to make binding recommendations to executive, or preferably to initiate legislation

this means two sources of legislation (at least)--Cabinet and committees-- therefore, each must have veto over the other --again, this would be very like the American system featuring separation of powers

(d) Role of Opposition Parties

If all the above happened, greatly enhanced role for opposition parties, who would participate more fully in legislative process. Now, all they can do is try to scream blue murder in public to try to embarrass a government which is immune to its protestations anyway.

if they are also released from constraints of party discipline, and if they get to participate on revamped and much more powerful committees, they will likewise be able to represent those who voted for them, in marked contrast to the current winner-takes-all system which emasculates them in Parliament.

Conclusions

Suggestions offered above assume an almost complete overhaul of system of Parliamentary democracy as we know it. I am effectively advocating a move towards American system, though I don't think we need to take that on wholesale -- can take parts that stand a chance of increasing accountability

I think they are good for accountability. But it's not as simple as I've presented it in short time available. System consists of interlocking and interdependent parts, so that a change to one or a few parts must mean changes to others (e.g. electoral system Senate, Supreme Court appointments, plebiscites, recall etc.)

But it's time to stop kidding ourselves that mere tinkering around the edges will fix a system that perhaps was appropriate for an earlier age in which the public was not expected to participate in political decision-making, and its role was limited to the periodic selection of elites who were then left to get on with it. What is needed is a complete engine-rebuild which will require imagination and commitment, and which will be fraught with difficulty. But such is the price of accountable government.